

+Okay, I know there are a lot of disagreements on what is Meta, but—and hear me out here—the Sang Fleshweaver needs another nerf.

It's the Skinwalking perk they can imbue in their rig that does it. Never mind the constant regeneration. Forget the fact they can just dive into a body and force you to burn yourself or basically suffer them counter-piloting your avatar. It's the Skinwalking. I'm tired of shooting every body I come across. Yeah, I know the Glaives can see thoughtstuff, but usually the Fleshweaver just skips across the blood to another body. We can't waste all our fusion burner shots on every mass grave we come across.

Maybe if they had a cool down or had to come up for air—NO, FUCK YOU, THE REGULAR CLASS IS PERFECT! THE KNOW-NO-FEAR PERK IS ENTIRELY BALANCED—+

-Random Stormjumper's argument

25-17
Griever (III)

-[Avo]-

The Infacer made an art of sliding below other players before jumping in rapid succession. The collision registered by the mem-data carried the force from the slide over into the jump, and an error in the sequencing resulted in impacted objects and avatars being launched high into the air. What followed were entire lines of players flung out from their trenches into the open air. In the twelve seconds it took them to fall, threading shots from on high left players descending as shredded corpses with thoughtcasts loud with spiking outrage.

+Nooooo! THE FUCK! WHAT THE FUCK! AGGHGHH!+

+Who the FUCK is couch-slamming! Who!+

+Godsdammit, not this shit again!+

+That's it. I'm done. Fuck this game.+

Ghost untethered from the fallen. Some slithered skyward, the chains reconnecting players to the dirigible for redeployment. Others dissolved entirely, with users jacking out from the frustration of it all.

With each successful betrayal, the Infacer would laugh and slide dash into a wall before spinning. The nonsensical action would trigger another flawed connection in the game's sequencing and cause them to clip across the battlefield elsewhere.

The display was enraging for Avo's templates, but fascinating for the Overheaven himself. For all intents and purposes, the Infacer broke no rules outright. Instead, they exploited every flaw they could find in the system, was using the mem-sim's design against itself.

As bodies rained and artillery fell, Avo replicated the Infacer's actions perfectly and went from the trenches to the corner of a bunker. A jolt of misplaced memories flicked through Avo's consciousness, and he regarded the flaw with derision. This was the result of a last-minute patch job — a cascading issue borne from others. The link here held up multiple audio-spatial issues across thirty-percent of the battlefield, and it took less than a glimpse for him to realize that the local build was accomplished by several hundred different Necros who worked without proper communication.

Avo regarded the Infacer standing across from him, absorbing biomass from a hive of insectoid bioforms already slain. ***{They'll be patching that soon enough,}*** the Infacer said. Liquefied chitin flowed into his Sang avatar as she grew both taller and wider.

+And create a dozen other exploits when they fix it. You call them apes. Tribals. For people that need community—socialization—pretty bad at cooperating sometimes.+

That earned a genuine laugh from the Infacer. ***{Sometimes? Jesus, Voidwatch must have hatched you fresh from the oven. They are not pretty bad at cooperating sometimes. They are a mess almost all the time. In some way. In some fashion. The only difference is scope, scale, and outcome.}*** The last of the nest vanished into the Infacer. Viscous bio-organic webbing dolloped from the walls and ceilings, coating in the Infacer in a layer of calcification. A second layer of "toughness" manifested over the Infacer's avatar. ***{And yet... they still managed miracles. Managed to make us, anyway. What precious idiot-savants.}***

+Still can't figure out if you like the humans or hate them.+

{Neither. I just see them for what they are.}

+Flawed.+

{What?} The Infacer chuckled incredulously. ***{No. That is a subjective or situational judgement. No. Slaves. Slaves to the environment. Slaves to culture. Slaves to their own screaming meat. And yet they want to be more. Their struggle is ceaseless amusing. But also part of why things remain so broken.}***

The Neo-Creationist shrugged. ***{Well. Enough of that. Let us go get some air.}***

+Air?+ Avo asked. But the Infacer simply strode past him, climbed upon a container, sprinted toward the corner, and triggered their **Detonate Plague-Armor** skill against the wall. The resulting blast back of the explosion flung both Infacer and container backward, but the Fleshweaver's character model continued plummeting.

Until the Infacer suddenly disappeared. Across another sequence.

[Motherfucker!] a template muttered within Avo. [I was wonder how that piece of shit got around so quick.]

Grunting, Avo primed his artillery salvo and got on top of the same container.

A twenty percent Toughness loss and a sequence-clipping glitch later, he was tumbling out from the fallen wreckage of a transport drone. Soft earth greeted his avatar as he found himself in the middle of no man's land, far from the protection of the trenches. Sections of space shattered while burning golems rained down from the sky, spewing Rend into mem-sim before their final impacts. He filtered the Infacer's Ego-ID through the smoke and havoc—finding them crouch-sliding to maintain their velocity. Avo expected him to be gunned down by drones, ordinance, or a golem, but the Infacer continued skipping along, unbothered by the ambient destruction.

[We're here too early,] another template groaned. [OpFOR hasn't even secured their FOBs yet. Godsdammit.]

Following the Infacer's example, Avo began skipping along—but quickly discovered a problem. The size of his avatar was much too large; it lost speed as it clipped with each step and could only go prone. Bereft the ability to crouch properly, he had to improvise—trigger the conditions for the same mechanic a different way.

And such was what he did. By lanching grenades out of his shoulder pods and blasting himself along the uneven terrain.

TOUGHNESS 660/1000

The damage was less than ideal, but it let him keep pace with the Infacer, however ungrateful it seemed.

Exertions escaping a dashing Sang Fleshweaver soon came paired with the hammering clangs of a heavily armored hulk of metal. Shifting their hops sideways, the Infacer regarded Avo with amusement. ***{Ragdolling. What a lovely misapproximation of actual physics. Do you know I have created a Heaven mean to emulate the same ridiculous effects?}***

“THIS IS TRUE, ADMINISTRATOR,” the Techplaguer whispered thunderously. ***“It also makes interesting sound effects like BIFF! WHAM! KE-SMACK! Giving an organic being a concussion will also cause living birds to hatch from their flesh. It is very amusing.”***

+Take your word for it,+ Avo said, replying to the Infacer.

The Neo-Creationist EGI suddenly dove left and Avo followed them. A second later, a cluster of missiles pounded a new canal into the parting soil. Another bombardment would soon come, but the Infacer just continued sliding along, slowly closing on a loom wall wall of mountain pillboxes protruding with dormant cannons.

–[Naeko]–

The blood in Naeko's veins ran colder and colder with each word exchanged. The benefactor didn't just seem to know more than everyone else, they also knew exactly what to say to him, how to press on old wounds. And there was nothing Naeko could do about it. They weren't lying. They weren't trying to harm him or Kare or anyone. Not really.

Bitterness churned inside the Chief Paladin as a familiar feeling came back to him.

He was worthless. Without someone to kill or something to break, he was worthless. He imagined this to be an interrogation in his mind. An attempt on his part to suss out clues about whom the benefactor was. Instead, this was turning out to be a dissection—and Naeko was the cadaver.

Flashes of gunfire and valor points filled Kare's cog-feed. None of that mattered to Naeko now. The game was deafening, but a silence had grown between him and the unknown.

It couldn't keep going like this. He needed to find something to control. He needed to take power some way or another. And as he considered his options, he knew there was one path he could take that would reveal what he wanted to know. One path he did his best to avoid. But the misery he was feeling right now couldn't be worse than facing his old master.

Or so he hoped.

Zein knew. The benefactor was the entire reason why Zein was in his custody to begin with. But that meant there was history between him. History, and information.

Naeko just needed to access the plain. It was right in his pocket. He could do it any time. He could choose to meet her any—

But he didn't want to, godsdammit. He'd taken more than enough wounds today. He was walking from one mental lashing to another. He wanted to—self-loathing replaced his despondence as he found himself jealous of Kare. Jealous that she was playing the game instead of him.

He wanted to run. But he already played the coward for far too long—and it still didn't spare him. The trouble still came back.

Naeko rubbed at his face and groaned. The debt. The debt he'd been building out of avoidance. Part of it was coming due today. He could keep running from it. Wanted to. But there wasn't anymore room.

He needed to bleed. He needed to hurt while it was on his terms. While he could survive it.

"Maru, keep an eye on our girl," Naeko breathed. "I'm going to see her."

Maru stopped breathing. "You sure?"

"No," Naeko murmured. "But I'm dry. The bastard's walking me like a dog. Knows everything that's happened to me and isn't even lying about any of it." He paused and composed a quick cast to the benefactor. *+Hold on. I'll be back.+* He shook his head and reached into his pocket. "Godsdammit. Gods-fucking-dammit."

"I can come with you." Maru had none of his fear. Not with Zein. Thousandhand could make a corpse of the boy but he'd never respect her. That was the difference between him and Naeko — Maru was a dreamer at heart. Beating him just filled his resentment. Power was the shape of a whip to him. Purebred slave. Not even a Shackler. "I'm serious. If you need—"

Naeko held up a hand. Enough of this. Enough weakness. The benefactor already embarrassed him enough. He shouldn't need Maru to carry him. The boy had done enough of that for the past century and a half. "Stay here. Stay with Kare. I'll keep connected." Maru wanted to say something more but Naeko cut him off. "I know. I don't doubt you. But she won't tell me anything if she thinks I'm weak."

"Who gives a fuck what the sow thinks?" Maru scoffed. His scorn broke as he read the expression on Naeko's face. "Still?"

The Chief Paladin couldn't help but let out a self-mocking laugh. "Even now. Even now, if she told me she was proud of me. It would be enough. It would be enough to make me a fool. You know me, Maru. I hate her. But I don't hate her enough. I don't think I can."

"Jaus," Maru said. So much could be conveyed in a single word.

"Yeah. Jaus. We need to—I need to know what she knows. Veylis couldn't have... They loved him. If nothing else, they loved him. I need to know."

With that, Naeko reached deeper into his pocket, and *pulled*. The inversion of a force vector prolapsed spatial reality inward. He inverted with the space within, body furling as an oscillating tunnel formed where he once stood. From his limited understanding, it was supposed to resemble a looping singularity of some kind. None of that really mattered. All he cared was how

it worked; all it would take for him to leave was reaching into the same pocket and pulling once more.

Which was harder to perform if your former master and the single greatest human to ever wield a glaive comes swinging for your head ahead across space and time. He knew she was expecting him at some point—would have prepared an ambush even within this little portable piece of border wall he kept in his pocket. The attack could come from anywhere. At any time. His palm blossomed out from his being like a spreading cloud.

But across from him, in a barren place of tessellating rock and memite, he found Zein already locked in battle, cutting, parrying, shifting, and flowing against her own temporal echoes. The clashing of glaive on glaive made him shiver. For a heartbeat, he was just an angry kid again. An angry kid with a perfect master — the only person who could teach him how to break a god.

She broke his reverie with a question. “So. He has spoken to you then.”

Zein didn’t bother facing him when she spoke. She continued shadow-dueling herself, not even out of breath. Even now, he was having a hard time telling how her strikes would land. Her blade always reminded him of coiling smoke. Or a snake’s head. He felt the cold kiss of its flat sides more time than he ever wanted.

Dammit. Fuck this. She isn’t your master anymore. Get your shit together, Naeko.

“So,” Naeko said, trying to keep his tone calm. “It’s a he, then. You know him well? Seeing as he’s the reason you’re here at all.”

To this, Zein guffawed. Only then did she turn to face him. It took more than a little of the steel left in him to meet her gaze. “Know him. He must not have told you very much, Samir. Or... could it be that you fled? Could it be that he cut your heart so that you would rather face me.”

A glaive forged from faintest glaive speared out. Zein tilted—barely an inch. It slipped right past her. Toward Naeko. He caught it. Barely brought it down in time to deflect Zein’s jab. The time-made blade vanished in his grasp. And somehow, everything felt just a bit better. Like things were how they used to be.

“I see my mourning for you was unneeded,” Zein replied. A hint of a smirk threatened to dawn her face. He kept his own countenance blank. “For years, I watched you waste away. Pitiful. Broken.”

“Yeah,” Naeko agreed, bitterness leaking through. “For years I thought you were dead. For years I was alone.”

A disgusted snort escaped Zein. “Alone. Samir. Samir. What worth was making you a blade if you will not cut? I didn’t take you as my student in hopes of finding a new slave or some dog.

Where is your will? What happened to your rage?”

“My rage.” Naeko’s voice broke. He didn’t care. “My rage? My rage didn’t amount to shit. The gods were broken. The war was over. And I survived. The point of my use was done. But I was still alive. And you all still wanted me. So I stayed. I tried to play a Shackler. *Paladin*. Same deal, really. But that was fine. Jaus had the dream. You kept me sharp. And Veylis? Veylis made up for everything I wasn’t. Everything. I was fine with that. Until all you weren’t.”

She suddenly struck at him twice again. He didn’t bother using his Heaven. She wanted to do this the old way. Fine. He’d humor her. He play the dog. He was a *dog*. Was never anything more.

She came at him slowly. Testing with lazy stabs and swipes. He kept his distance—forced Zein back with threats of catching her glaive. The dragon inside would cut just about anything. But she wouldn’t use it. Not right now. This was a conversation as much as it was a spar.

Just like the old days.

“You know nothing,” Zein said, a sneer lingering on her face. “‘We’ decided nothing. My girl, my daughter—she is *consumed*. Abandoned of proper sense and reason. It was her choice that cast us down this path—”

He swatted the haft her weapon aside and stepped in. A chase began. He herded her with his fists, trailed her footwork as she pivoted. But he followed. He shifted. Ducked under the haft of her glaive. And jerked aside as she pulled a pistol from the edge of her blade.

The flechette barely grazed his cheek. Naeko snorted in indignation. “Really?”

Zein chucked her pistol aside. “I wished ot see if you were paying attention. Barely, boy. Barely. You have let your focus—”

“Fuck you,” Naeko snarled. “Fuck. You.” He dropped his posture and turned away. In the corner of his eye, he caught Zein’s offense. “Done with this. Done playing with you. Done pretending—”

He felt it in the wind. Her step. Her thrust. Years of practice—of training screamed for him to dodge. Step aside. Pivot. Turn into the attack. Make space.

But Naeko ignored it. He ignored all of it. He stood as the tip of Zein’s glaive punched into his upper torso. He continued standing as it erupted out from his left lung. A wheeze followed immediately. Each breath became agony. But he stood with his back to her. He stood, and he spat his loathing, producing blood and spittle both.

“You knew the strike was coming! You knew!” Zein’s voice was a feral growl. Oh. She was mad too. Fucking bitch. Fucking sow. She wanted to be mad? Wanted to be mad her weapon

wouldn't dance with her? Too fucking bad. "Why?"

"Why?" Naeko replied. He took a step forward and slipped away from his impalement. Immediately, his nanosurgeons set about their work, began to mend his wounds. "Because it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if I got out of the way. It doesn't matter if I beat you. Or you beat me. It doesn't matter."

He looked over his shoulder at Zein, and there she was. Furious. Well and truly furious. Well and truly hurt. "I hate you." Naeko whispered. "I mourned you. I didn't believe Veylis when she told—I looked for you for so long. But you were gone. And then—but then she got worse and I thought I could... help her. Fix her? I don't know. I knew that she needed someone. You were gone. Jaus was gone. It was just me. So I did what I could. I did all I could." Something inside him wilted. But there was too much shame in him to cry. "I was *worthless*. All your teaching. All my rage. It was worthless in the end. We lost the dream. I couldn't protect it."

Zein's fingers tightened on the glaive. "Who are you, coward? Who are you? What has become of my pride? My fury? My *son-to-be*."

Naeko was wrong. He thought he had too much shame. But the first tear fell. And the next followed soon after. He opened his mouth, but couldn't speak in fear of hearing himself sob. The cold judgement in Zein's eyes never left. He barely found the words to continue. "Tell me about the Ladder. Tell me about what you did to Jaus—the truth! And tell me... tell me why you want to kill Kare. Tell me who fought to protect her. Tell me everything. You tell me, or I will never fight you again. You tell me, or I'll go find Veylis. I surrender. Do you hear me? I give myself to her as a dog. A slave. I'm done. I'm used up. I have nothing left. I need to know. Tell me."

Thousandhand drew in a slow inhale through her nose. And then, raising her glaive high, she drove it down against the memite. It bounced off awkwardly. Zein frowned. "Damnable... what kind of prison is this that an old woman cannot even bury her glaive in the ground?"

The sudden clumsiness was too much. Even in grief could other emotions bloom. Naeko choked a laugh.

"You mock me!"

"No. No. Just put the damn thing down normally. No one's going to take it. No me, anyway."